The Promise of Appreciative Inquiry in Library Organizations

Maureen Sullivan

Abstract

Appreciative Inquiry is a different approach to organizational development, one that calls for the deliberate search for what contributes to organizational effectiveness and excellence. Appreciative Inquiry is a practical philosophy that assumes the organization is a "mystery" and a "marvel" to be embraced, not a problem to be solved (Cooperrider & Srivastava, 1987, p. 131). The author's experience with this different approach to organizational development reveals its power to unleash the creative energy within library organizations. This article describes the principles, process, and some of the practices of Appreciative Inquiry.

Introduction

Library organizations, like so many other types of organizations today, face the need for significant transformation in the way they are organized, the work they do, the ways in which they perform this work, and in how they meet the challenges of staying relevant and meeting the needs and expectations of their various constituent groups. Leaders of all types of libraries and the staff who work with them continually face new and more complex problems. Libraries have a long history of tackling these challenges and problems with such organizational development efforts as strategic planning, restructuring, redesigning work, and project management. Traditionally such planned change efforts have operated from the premise that the place to begin is with what is wrong, what is not working well, or what needs to change. This approach has been described by some as a "deficit-based" approach, one that focuses on the negative. Some characteristics of

Maureen Sullivan, Organization Development Consultant, 3696 Thomas Point Road, Annapolis, MD 21403
LIBRARY TRENDS, Vol. 53, No. 1, Summer 2004 ("Organizational Development and Leadership," edited by Keith Russell and Denise Stephens), pp. 218–229

this deficit-based thinking are an emphasis on problems; attention to the people who are perceived to be causing these problems; a tendency to be critical of ideas, accomplishments, and the people involved; and a focus on resources that are limited or lacking.

Appreciative Inquiry offers a compelling alternative—the quest for the best possible situation. In this quest the focus is on possibilities, not problems; meaningful involvement of people to enable them to contribute their best thinking; attention to learning and generative thinking; collaboration and building trusting relationships; and a focus on existing resources and how to make the best use of them.

Appreciative Inquiry Defined

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to planned change that begins with careful attention to and the identification of what has worked in the past and what works in the present. Appreciative Inquiry is a

> collaborative and highly participative, system-wide approach to seeking, identifying, and enhancing the "life-giving forces" that are present when a system is performing optimally in human, economic, and organizational terms. It is a journey during which profound knowledge of a human system at its moments of wonder is uncovered and used to co-construct the best and highest future of that system. (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, pp. 14–15)

Appreciative Inquiry is the "study and exploration of what gives life to human systems when they function at their best. This approach to personal change and organization change is based on the assumption that questions and dialogue about strengths, successes, values, hopes, and dreams are themselves transformational" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 1).

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to the development of human systems that views those systems as life-giving and enhancing; ones that contain positive forces to be understood and embraced. Those life-giving forces emerge from our conversations as a result of our assumptions, values, beliefs, and images. Those conversations govern our choice of actions. If the conversations are energizing and life affirming then the "whole" system can be involved in co-constructing the desired future.

Appreciative Inquiry is a strategy for change that begins with the identification of the "best of what is" to enable stakeholders to pursue their dreams and visions of "what could be." It is a process of collaborative inquiry to clarify the strengths, positive experiences, "good news," achievements, and best qualities of a group, an organization, a situation, a relationship, or an individual. It is a means to create change based upon the premise that we can effectively move forward if we know what has worked in the past. It is an approach to organizational development that quickly engages people in an exploration of what they value most about their work. It brings forth peak experiences and examples of excellence to enable the creation of the

future organizations that will embody their highest aspirations. As Table 1 illustrates, it is the opposite of the traditional problem-solving approach (Hammond, 1996, p. 24).

Appreciative Inquiry has been applied around the world in a variety of types of organizations, including both those with staff represented by unions and those without unions. It also has been applied in community organizations and in small group work. It is now an established approach to organizational development that has been used successfully with diversity programs, team building, strategic planning, work redesign, restructuring, and transforming organizational culture. The practice of Appreciative Inquiry reflects the values and fundamental principles of organizational development. In fact, it represents a return to the tenets espoused by some of the early developers of the field, for example, Kurt Lewin, Richard Beckhard, Chris Argyris, and Douglas McGregor.

Origins of Appreciative Inquiry

In 1980 David Cooperrider, then a doctoral student at Case Western Reserve University, was engaged in an organizational diagnosis at the Cleveland Clinic. Under the guidance of his advisor, Dr. Suresh Srivastava, he had the insight to shift from the identification and analysis of what was and was not working to a focus on the identification of the factors that were contributing to the clinic's effectiveness. Cooperrider first conducted a series of interviews with clinic staff to learn what was wrong. During the interviews, he began to notice factors in some parts of the organization that contributed to organizational effectiveness. Cooperrider refocused his work to adopt an "appreciative" approach, to give attention to the strengths, achievements, and positive forces that contributed to excellence. Clinic leaders invited him to help them create an approach to their practice based upon "positive inquiry." As Cooperrider formalized his theory of change he laid the foundation for Appreciative Inquiry. This early work led to a paradigm shift in how to understand an organizational system (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, pp. 15–21).

Table 1. Traditional Problem Solving vs. Appreciative Inquiry

	Problem-Solving	Appreciative Inquiry
Basic Assumption	An organization is a problem to be solved	An organization is a mystery to be embraced
Key Activities	Identify the problem based upon a "felt need" Analysis of causes Analysis of possible solutions Action planning (treatment)	Appreciating and valuing the "best of what is" Envisioning "what might be" Holding dialogues about "what should be" Innovating "what will be"

Some of the Research That Supports Appreciative Inquiry

As Appreciative Inquiry has developed as a system of thought in the past two decades, research in other areas has yielded results that support an appreciative or positive approach to change. These include the following:

- Research on the placebo effect demonstrates that patients show marked physical, psychological, and emotional improvement in their symptoms when they believe they are taking effective medicine, even when that treatment is a sugar pill.
- The Pygmalion Effect studies demonstrated the power that another person's image and expectations can have on an individual's performance. Students in a class were divided randomly into two subgroups. Teachers were told that one group of students was intelligent, hardworking, and successful and that a second group of students was not very bright, not well-behaved, and performed poorly. Within a single semester, those who were labeled poor students were performing poorly and those who were labeled successful were doing well. The key conclusion from these studies is that individuals rise to the level of the images and expectations others have of them.
- Performance theory in sports includes a number of examples in which a shift to a focus on the positive and doing the right thing, and away from a focus on what one is doing incorrectly has indeed led to improvement. A positive affirmation approach causes one's whole body to respond to what the mind imagines to be possible. One sees the basketball making the basket rather than thinking one should not miss the basket.

Principles of Appreciative Inquiry

The philosophy of Appreciative Inquiry is expressed in a set of eight principles that together convey the set of beliefs and values that guide practice. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom describe these principles in *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry* (2003, pp. 51–79) and explain that they are "derived from three generalized streams of thought—social constructionism, image theory, and grounded research—they suggest that human organizing and change is a positive, socially interactive process of discovering and crafting life-affirming, guiding images of the future." Table 2 presents each of the principles and includes a slogan for remembering them.

Underlying Assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry Simply Stated

One of the most effective ways to introduce Appreciative Inquiry to library staff has been to invite them to read *The Thin Book of Appreciative Inquiry* (Hammond, 1996). This booklet provides an excellent introduction

Table 2. Summary of the Eight Principles of Appreciative Inquiry

The Constructionist Principle	Words Create Worlds
Organizations are living, dynamic systems—"human constructions" that evolve through social interaction and communication. It is through this interaction and communication that meaning is made and that the organization evolves.	
The Simultaneity Principle	Inquiry Creates Change
The questions we ask set the stage for what we discover and learn. Change begins when we begin to ask the questions.	
The Anticipatory Principle	Image Inspires Action
The image of the future guides current behavior in any organization. Organizations evolve in the direction of their most compelling image of the future.	
The Positive Principle	Positive Questions Lead to Positive Change
Positive questions create the impetus and energy for change. "The more positive the questions we use to guide a team building or organization development initiative, the more long-lasting and effective the change effort" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 67).	
The Poetic Principle	We Can Choose What We Study
Organizations are "open books—endless sources of learning, inspiration, and interpretation." We decide what to study. The choice can be to learn what problems clients encounter in using our services or what they value in their experience. We can examine why staff morale is low or we can seek to understand what factors lead to the retention of the high performers. The choice is ours to make.	
The Enactment Principle	Acting "As If" Is Self-Fulfilling
Gandhi's "Be the change you want to see" embodies this principle. When we begin to act as if something we desire in the future is available in the present, we begin to create the vision of the future in our current reality.	
The Wholeness Principle	Wholeness Brings Out the Best
Engagement of the whole system, everyone in the organization, brings out the best in the organization, its systems, relationships, and individual members. As a human system, an organization is the people who work in it.	
The Free Choice Principle	Free Choice Liberates Power
This principle is based on the premise that people are motivated and become committed to results when they are free to decide how they will contribute to organizational performance. It assumes that commitment, rather than compliance, leads to high performance.	

and overview of the key concepts, including the following set of assumptions (Hammond, 1996, pp. 20–21):

1. In every society, organization, or group, something works.
2. What we focus on becomes our reality.
3. Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities.

4. The act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way.
5. People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known).
6. If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what are best about the past.
7. It is important to value differences.
8. The language we use creates our reality.

Appreciative Inquiry in Practice

In most libraries today the application of an Appreciative Inquiry approach to any organization development effort would require a major shift in the set of beliefs and assumptions about how to bring about change. There is a long history of experience with a problem-driven approach to planning and making change. The negative is seductive. There is a focus on problems and a strong tendency to dwell on what is wrong or not working, often without taking time to examine what is working. In a number of cases, performance assessment represents judgment of experiences, not a means to learn from them. Library human resource systems emphasize the evaluation of performance and performance appraisals, not learning and development plans or even performance improvement plans. The choice to focus on the positive requires a deep and sustained commitment to affirm the value of the positive.

The commitment of senior leadership is critical to the successful application of Appreciative Inquiry in any organizational development strategy. An important early step in developing this commitment is to educate leaders and stakeholders about the philosophy, rationale, supporting research, process, and benefits of Appreciative Inquiry as an approach to organizational development. It is essential that senior leadership make the conscious commitment to focus on the positive as the basis for change.

Process: The 4–D Cycle

The predominant model of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process is known as the AI or 4–D Cycle and is comprised of four stages: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny (sometimes referred to as Delivery). This 4–D Cycle is intended to be a general description of the process to be applied to the special circumstances of an organization. As is the case with any model like this, the context in which it is used and the particular needs and challenges of the situation must be considered in its application.

While this article focuses on the application of Appreciative Inquiry to a large-scale organizational development effort, this AI Cycle can be applied in a variety of ways, informally or formally, in a small group or across an organization. Appreciative Inquiry can be used without any explanation.

A critical step to take before beginning the 4–D Cycle is to select the

topics for the focus of the Appreciative Inquiry. Topic selection needs to be done thoughtfully and carefully—what we choose to study is likely to become our new reality (Hammond, 1996, pp. 32–33).

The focus of attention in the initial stage of *Discovery* is to identify "the best of what is" by bringing to light examples of high performance, times when the organization achieved excellence, and experiences as well as aspects of the organization in which staff say they take pride or that they may identify as a "life-giving force."

The key method for this search to uncover the positive is known as the Appreciative Interview. The Appreciative Interview is a means to share stories among stakeholders about their most memorable experiences and accomplishments in the area covered by the topic choice. This telling of stories and the work accomplished in the subsequent phases results in the generation of new ideas, images, assumptions—which lead to new attitudes and behaviors. Appreciative Interviews throughout the organization are a means to engage staff and build commitment as well as a means to reveal the whole story of the organization.

Some examples of questions that can be used to start an Appreciative Interview are listed below. These have proven to be effective with individuals and with groups of varying size.

1. Identify a time in your experience with this library when you felt most effective and engaged. Describe this. How did you feel? What made this situation possible?
2. What is your value to the organization? In what ways do you contribute your best? What are your strengths?
3. What do you appreciate most about this library as an organization? In what ways does it excel?
4. What are the three or four most important aspirations for the future of this library? What are the key components for its vision?
5. What are some sources of pride for you in your work?
6. Describe a leader who has influenced you. What did that person do? How did that person interact with you? Describe some specific instances in which you experienced this influence.
7. Think of a time when you felt especially creative. Describe what you were doing, what you were thinking , and what you were feeling.
8. Tell me about a peak experience in your professional work. What was it about your situation, organization, colleagues, or yourself that enabled this to occur?

The key focus of the next stage, *Dream,* is the creation of a vision that brings to light the collective aspirations of stakeholders. This is a time to question the status quo and to ask "what might be." This stage is practical in that it is grounded in the stories and findings that emerged in the first

stage. It also is creative in that it calls for expansion of the organization's capacity. Staff work together to create shared images of what the library would be like if the instances of excellence and compelling experiences discovered in the previous stage became a way of life, the norm, in the new organization.

Stage three, *Design,* is the opportunity for the staff to work together to construct the library organization created as a vision in the previous stage. Here staff spend time in the articulation of the desired attributes of the new organization and develop a more detailed description of the work design, structure, systems, culture, and work environment called for in the results of the Dream stage.

Destiny (sometimes referred to as Delivery) is the final stage of the 4–D Cycle. The work of this stage focuses on the individual and organizational commitments necessary to achieve the aspirations set forth in the second stage and further developed in the third stage.

Appreciative Inquiry and the Learning Organization

Peter Senge describes the learning organization in *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (Senge, 1990). The principles and practices of the learning organization align closely with those of Appreciative Inquiry. Each of the five disciplines of the learning organization (systems thinking, shared vision, team learning, mental models, and personal mastery) has a corresponding set of beliefs, assumptions, and practices within Appreciative Inquiry. Common elements include a belief in the capacity of people to create change; the importance of generative thinking and generative learning; collaboration as a means for learning, growth, and development; understanding the organization as an organic and dynamic human system; and a deep commitment to the power of the positive over the negative. Each has emerged out of a fundamental rethinking of what motivates and shapes human behavior in organizations.

The discipline of *systems thinking* is a core principle of Appreciative Inquiry. At every stage of the process, seeing the organization as a living, dynamic, whole system is fundamental to the work at that stage.

The Dream phase of the Appreciative Inquiry process is very similar to the discipline of *shared vision.* In fact, in this phase the work is directed at the creation of a shared vision, one that describes the organization's aspirations for each of the areas identified in the Discovery phase. The shared vision is the articulation of the dreams of the future for those aspects most valued by the people of the organization—what staff want to carry forward to the future.

Because the process of Appreciative Inquiry assumes engagement of the whole system, the discipline of *team learning* comes into play with its many tools to support collaboration. The practice of dialogue—meaning-

ful conversation that seeks understanding at a deeper level and calls for balanced participation to enable the different voices to be heard—is a key tool in both Appreciative Inquiry and the learning organization.

The discipline of *mental models* calls for a deep awareness of the assumptions that underlie organizational behavior, a habit of surfacing and testing these assumptions, and a commitment to create new mental constructs or mindsets that will lead to positive action. This work leads to creating a readiness and openness to change.

Finally, the discipline of *personal mastery* is that part of the learning organization framework that directly addresses the role of the individual in the evolution and growth of the organization. Appreciative Inquiry affirms the importance of this individual role and also encourages each individual to have a clear personal vision and focus attention and energy toward what might be—in the direction of possibilities and the future. This discipline recognizes the importance of seeing reality objectively.

Principles of the Application of Appreciative Inquiry and the Learning Organization to Libraries

The following set of principles has evolved from my practice as a consultant in the past ten years, a practice that began with a focus on the learning organization as a framework for the transformation of library organizations. This set of guiding principles is derived from the application of both learning organization and Appreciative Inquiry approaches in a variety of library organizations.

- Recognize that library organizations are living, organic systems. Staff at all levels, from all perspectives give life to the library organization.
- Behavior in the present is influenced by the future that is anticipated. Leaders have the opportunity to bring about change by engaging staff in the 4–D Cycle and by focusing on the positive possibilities of the future.
- Both approaches are generative processes. "Learning as we go" is exciting, releases the capacity of staff, and enables the organization to become the best possible.
- Effective, relevant questions are important to the inquiry process at the heart of the work done in both approaches.
- Leaders have influence when they bring a positive focus to the inquiry and learning process.
- Continued success comes from the engagement of staff and the appreciation of their effort and commitment.
- People individually and collectively have skills, talents, and contributions to bring to life.
- Any large-scale change effort requires a commitment to continual learning, growth, and development—of the organization, of groups and teams, and of all individuals.

Getting Started: Some Ideas for Application

The introduction and application of appreciative inquiry as an organizational development effort requires first and foremost that leaders in the library have a deep awareness and understanding of the principles and practices of Appreciative Inquiry. In most organizations this means a significant shift in patterns of thinking. A critical first step, therefore, in the formal introduction of Appreciative Inquiry would be for the senior leadership group to undertake the study of this approach. This study should include careful consideration of the best means to introduce library staff to Appreciative Inquiry in practice. It also is possible to begin to apply the principles and practices of Appreciative Inquiry in a less formal way. The following offers some suggestions for this approach:

1. Begin a planned change or problem-solving effort with reflective exploration of the "best of what is." Focus on strengths, values, sources of pride, and best experiences.
2. Drop the "devil's advocate" approach in favor of the "angel's advocate"—ask questions to support suggestions, possible scenarios, and ideas.
3. Involve as many stakeholders as possible in the creation of a shared vision of a preferred future. The libraries at the University of Iowa, Brown University, George Washington University, the University of Maryland, and the University of Cincinnati are some examples of where this has been done successfully.
4. Identify the core elements that give life to the library. One way to do this is to clarify the core values through a process in which all staff have the opportunity to participate. This set of values can be translated to a set of behaviors for staff to practice. As one example, staff in information services and resources at Bucknell University developed a "Living Our Values" program several years ago.
5. Use the Appreciative Interview technique whenever possible. Take time to frame questions that are positive and that will generate hope, imagination, and creative thinking, such as the following: What current trend might have the most significant positive effect on the future of this library? When have you felt most creative in your work? If success were guaranteed, what bold actions would we take? Imagine twenty years into the future and all of the pressing problems of today's libraries have been solved—what role has this library played?
6. Close meetings and other activities with a discussion of what worked well and what practices occurred that should be continued. Take time to identify individual contributions to the success of the meeting.
7. Introduce learning and development plans. Focus on an individual's strengths and competencies as much or more than on his or her areas for development. The Tri-College Libraries in the Philadelphia area (Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and Swarthmore) collaborated a few years ago

to create a professional development program for staff in the three libraries. Their Task Force on Learning and Development produced the excellent *Individual Learning and Development Plan* for this purpose.

8. Create a recognition program that is an integral part of the library's operations. Make it easy to administer, and make it possible for anyone at any time to participate. Be sure that it includes a variety of means to recognize the full range of accomplishments. A good example of such a program exists at the North Suburban Library System in Wheeling, Illinois.
9. Be mindful of the language used. Words are powerful and convey reality. Use language that conveys hope, optimism, and possibility instead of language that focuses on problems.
10. Remember the power of the Pygmalion Effect—how expectations influence performance. Expect the best performance and assume that people have the best intentions in what they do. Coach others from the perspective of building on strengths.

Conclusion

While Appreciative Inquiry as an approach to complex, transformational change may be new to library organizations, it is not as new to many other types of organizations. In the twenty-four years since its inception, this affirmative strategy to transform organizations has evolved into one of the most promising practices in the field of organizational development. As library leaders focus their attention on the need to transform their organizations, Appreciative Inquiry offers a means to do this that enables staff to affirm the best of the past and the present as choices are made to assure a future in which library services and programs are relevant.

One compelling choice to make in the continual whirl of change and transformation is whether to focus on the positive or the negative. Each of us—the library director, the manager, the staff member, the consultant—has the option to give attention to what is affirmative, life-giving, and valuable or to give that attention to what is wrong or needs to be fixed. Consider the benefits, personal and organizational, of spending time and energy in a positive, creative, and appreciative approach versus the often negative and stressful deficit-based approach. Professionally and personally, what is the best way to spend your time and energy?

References

Cooperrider, D. L., & Srivastava, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In R. W. Woodman & W. A. Pasmore (Eds.), *Research in organizational change and development: An annual series featuring advances in theory, methodology, and research, vol. 1.* Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Hammond, S. A. (1996). *The thin book of appreciative inquiry.* Plano, TX: CSS Publishing Company.

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization.* New York: Doubleday/Currency.

Watkins, J. M., & Mohr, B. J. (2001). *Appreciative inquiry: Change at the speed of imagination*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

Whitney, D. K., & Trosten-Bloom, A. (2003). *The power of appreciative inquiry: A practical guide to positive change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.